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ON SEMIOTIC CONVENTIONS

The considerations I shall present in this article are part of a bigger dissertation on conventions in different areas of culture.

In the introduction to the dissertation I differentiate a few senses of the word "convention" and I need to shortly give these senses here, since I shall further refer to them in the course of argumentation. Generally speaking, there are three senses of the term "convention" which could refer to a convention in the sense of agreement, in the sense of decision and in the sense of usus — however, within each of these senses I differentiate the aspect of activity and the aspect of a product or result of a particular activity. Let's add that it is clear that not every agreement, or decision, or usus is of a conventional nature, only certain specified subsets of these. Thus $K — I — a$ is a convention understood as an activity of legally bound persons, which consists in: 1° overcoming real or potential disagreements on a certain matter between principals of these persons, and 2° reaching a mutual agreement by principals under specific conditions (and, in certain situations, the legally bound person and the principal can be the same subject of activity). $K — I — b$ is a product of $K — I — a$ in the form of a verbal text which gives the content of the reached agreement and its conditions.

$K — II — b$ is a decision about a chosen indicator or a class of indicators I which constitute a certain system (order of relation) within the scope of products of a sign nature that belong to the universe of culture objects.

$K — II — b$ is the indicator chosen by means of this decision. It can be a postulate, a definition, a system of axioms, a rule of behavior, a literary or artistic canon, etc.

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K — III — a is a certain usus, a stereotypical way of being which is not an instinctive behavior but rather is aimed at communicating a certain semantic content determined by a directive of the type K — II — b or an agreement K — I — b, even if the persons maintaining the usus do not realize there is the convention conditioning it. K — III — b are conventionalized signs of K — III — a (social conventions, conventional clothes, decorations, etc.).

The area in which conventions — in each of the three mentioned senses of the word "convention" — play an important role is *ex definitione* the area of signs of different types. Moreover, it is possible to claim that the notion of a convention is characteristic of this area, and that it is exactly because of the prevalence of sign systems and meanings in the world of culture that this notion necessarily permeates through this whole world.

According to the previously mentioned characteristics, human speech considered as people's NATURAL, spontaneous way of behaving in order to reveal their own spiritual states, to communicate with others, to affect others and interact with them, to elaborate on and maintain knowledge about the reality, is not an example of a convention in the sense of K — III, for it does not meet the second condition — it is not only about communicating certain contents determined by directives of the type K — II — b or agreements K — I — b. This is not contradictory to the fact that language considered as a system of signs and the rules of using them is a result of a convention of the type K — II — a, while the rules themselves may be in the nature of a convention K — II — b. It especially applies to artificial, formal languages and certain aspects of natural language.

However, not all signs — in a certain understanding of the term — are of conventional nature. It especially applies to the area of signs which are customarily called "oznaki" [indicates] in Polish terminology.

The notion of an indicate, variously understood and defined, can be reduced to the notion of an ordered set U, such that $U = F\{(a \rightarrow b)$ for $S\}$ when S is a conscious subject, a is a certain state of affairs which is available for perception — such that can be regarded by S as an indicator of another state of affairs, namely b. A particular a indicates b for S if and only if S seeing a can accept b on account of the fact that a and b are in a unique ordering relation. This ordering relation can be founded ontically (e.g. when a determines b causally) or on the basis of convention. In the latter case the role of convention can be twofold. It consists in providing an indicator a with certain sign elements accepted conventionally, and a state of affair a is founded as an indicator through either a real (function

or causal) relation with a state of affairs *b*, or the relation is an ordering relation assigning states of affairs only on the basis of a convention. Then the choice of an indicator *a* needs not be pragmatically motivated and can be of arbitrary nature. Let's call indicates of the first type — SYMPTOMS, while of the second type — SIGNALS.

A conventional indicate often owes its nature to the fact that it is a state of affairs in which what is perceived is a certain symbol. Hanging a black flag on the building of a university is an indicate that an employee of the institution has died; while the black flag itself is a symbol of mourning. Putting ash on the head is an indicate of penance, while ash in this situational context is a symbol of transience of earthly life. Sometimes just a behavior or an activity that operates with a symbol is called a symbol; however, it is better to call it "symbolic," restricting the term "symbol" to things and not states of affairs or processes which are indicates by nature. Even in this restriction the word "symbol" is used to refer to signs that belong to various areas of life. There are logical and mathematical symbols in science, quality symbols in technology and industry, religious symbols, symbols in poetry and art. The sign "=" is a symbol of an equality relation in mathematics, and the letter "*p*" is a symbol of a sentence in the propositional calculus. Number one is a symbol of truth in the Boolean algebra, and can be a symbol of good quality of goods in technology. However, it is also said that the Cross of Lorraine became the symbol of the Resistance in France, while a skeleton with a scythe has been a symbol of death for ages; a trowel is a symbol of freemasonry, etc. What all these objects have in common is that they were constructed or chosen to have a certain specific semantic function, that is, the function of indicating which was assigned to them on the basis of a convention. The difference between the objects is twofold. One, consists in that some of these signs, except for the semantic function of symbolizing assigned by a convention, present something itself or represent something on another basis (a drawn cross is an image of a real cross, a sculpted skeleton — of a real skeleton, etc.), whereas other signs do not have another semantic reference except for the convention which assigns their semantic function (a piece of black material, equality sign, etc.). The other difference is related to what can be called their value-creating content. There are emotionally neutral symbols, introduced in order to improve certain cognitive operations, to communicate information better, to reason more easily, etc., and such that were used to designate objects and at the same time to signal certain values and evoke appropriate axiological feelings. Well, sometimes the name "symbol" is only reserved to the latter type of conventional signs. This is

what semantic conventions in poetry, art, or religion are aimed at. This issue is addressed in one of the later chapters of the dissertation mentioned at the beginning of this article. What is meant here is to differentiate between symbol and signal, and to point out the conventional nature of symbols. Let's add, in order to avoid misunderstandings, that the two proposed classifications of symbols intersect, that is, a neutral or axiological nature of semantic content of a sign is not related to a type of objects which function as symbols, but to a type of their pragmatic use which is assigned by the nature of objects designated by them.

Because symbols, except for a semantic reference determined by a convention, sometimes also present through their content, different from physical materials, certain intentional objects they can be in principle understood twofold: either as signs presenting the intentional object X, or as signs representing (in the sense of a symbol) another object Y through X or its properties. Thus, for example, the bottom part of the central section of van der Weyden's *Last Judgement* triptych can present, through its content, certain intentional objects: a young woman who is holding a balance scale on whose pans there are naked kneeling figures. Or can force the audience, because of its certain properties and the name *Last Judgement*, to interpret this intentional object (a woman with a balance scale) as a SYMBOL of justice. Using the sign in the latter function, that is in the function of a symbol, is conditioned by the familiarity with the convention the sign assumes. This familiarity is so common in certain cultural spheres that a sign immediately, so to speak naturally, imposes itself as a symbol; sometimes, however, the unfamiliarity with the convention adopted in certain cultural spheres makes it impossible to understand the sign in this way — as a result the sign is completely incomprehensible or is understood incompletely, i.e. only the direct content it presents is understood. For example, when somebody unaware of its symbolic meaning recognizes the emblem of freemasonry as an image of a trowel, and not as a symbol of the organization. Independently from this duality, signs operating as symbols can be ambiguous if different conventions are assigned to different objects (the Cross of Lorraine as the symbol of The Duchy of Lorraine, as the symbol of the Resistance, as the symbol of the Society Against Tuberculosis [Towarzystwo Walki z Gruźlicą]; ">" as a sign of a greater-than relation and as a symbol of a set inclusion; a balance scale as a symbol of justice and as a symbol of a star constellation, etc.).

Objects which are images of other objects are not *eo ipso* signs of these objects. A portrait of Napoleon in a coronation costume is no sign. Despite

the critics of Edouard Manet, the portrait of Olympia is not a symbol of perversion. In order for an image to be a sign of something, it needs to be assigned, through a convention, to a class of objects which it should indicate or stand for.

Even if it is a sign of an individual object, it indicates either through denoting the set which the object belongs to, or through indicating the singleton set of which the object is the only element. The former case takes place when, for example, a schematic city map shows an image of a train to indicate the location of the railway station; the latter — when, for example, an image of an arrow or a centaur holding a bow is the zodiac sign of the Sagittarius constellation. Even the most similar images become signs of the depicted objects only when they acquire the function of indicating, standing for or symbolizing. Claiming that many words in natural languages are created on the basis of imitating sounds which are naturally associated with the objects which the words designate, does not violate the thesis on conventional (though not arbitrary) assigning of names to their designates. Thus, I seem to disagree with the not uncommon opinion that sculptures, paintings, or even schematic models (maps or charts), which show certain objects, are included to natural signs and opposed to conventional signs, such as symbols, on this basis that the former are similar to the objects they present, and the latter have this function only through a convention. For a mere similarity between objects A and B does not make one of them a sign of the other. That A is a sign of B for X depends on assigning A with a certain function in relation to B, and as such the assigning of the function involves a certain decision, agreement or usus. Creating certain objects that represent other objects can be aimed at either presenting or indicating, in order to show certain properties of presented objects (this function is present in portraits, schematic models, maps, iconic symbols), or presenting the concept (this signitive function is present in mathematical symbols, words of speech).

Presenting in order to show often, though not always, operates with objects which are similar in some regards to the presented objects. This could be an intuitive similarity between the image and the thing presented in the image, or an isomorphism or homomorphism of the model and the object which resembles the model. And it is exactly this similarity that can naturally motivate the semiotic convention that assigns object A with a function of presenting object B. Thus, in this sense and only in this sense, iconic signs can be called natural signs, and not in the sense that they failed to become signs of other objects through an appropriate convention. For the

fact that certain objects resemble other objects on the basis of similarity does not make them — as mentioned earlier — signs of these objects. (When I assert that Peter resembles his twin brother Paul, or that a rock near Ojców is similar to Hercules' club I make the first element of the similarity relation neither a sign nor a representative of the other). In order for object A to be an indicating sign of object B, it needs to be provided with the semantic function of "indicating" or "mapping," it needs to be created or assigned and interpreted to this end. When two portraits of the same person are compared: one painted in the naturalistic convention, the other — in the cubist or expressionist convention, accepting that the two portraits indicate a real person, and regarding them as sign products, in both cases is a result of a certain convention. I can analyze the world of the objects presented in a piece of art without going beyond the piece of art and beyond this intentional world, without using them to reach to alleged real or ideal beings, which supposedly represent the intentional objects of the piece of art. People depicted in a painting live in their own imaginative world and the viewer can focus their spontaneous intention on them. Reaching for objects of the real or ideal world, as if through these intentional objects, involves modifying their strictly esthetic function accompanied by classifying them as semic objects. The image acquires the function of a complex expression, it is a system of signs that designate something beyond themselves; becomes something like a complex description. Similarly to an account of a certain states of affairs which is not a result of a convention when it maps a certain reality — even though the expressions used to describe this reality contain elements (words) that designate objects on the basis of semiotic convention — and, similarly to a map, which informs about properties of a certain fragment of the globe on the basis of mapping, although the map's signs are assigned to certain properties and components of the mapped area on the basis of semiotic convention while the spatial relationships are characterized in a certain metric convention, then also an image, interpreted as a representative of a certain real object, presents or maps the object not on the basis of resemblance, but on the basis of the convention adopted by the artist and the viewer. That this is indeed the case is confirmed by the method of creating historical paintings that represent people of the past, which makes use of models. Jan Matejko's paintings are full of portraits of his contemporaries, but characters presented in the paintings do not represent them at all. Looking at *Prussian Homage*, the viewer — who does not limit themselves to purely esthetic contemplation of intentional objects — "recognizes" Stańczyk in the character wearing a jester cap and sitting next to the throne, and not Józef Szujski whom

the character very much resembled. For who is represented by a particular character in the painting is established by the convention the painter adopts or suggests (sometimes by means of the name given to the painting). The above can be summed up as follows: the fact that signs can resemble the signified that they present, and that this resemblance is taken into account when choosing or creating a sign, does not change the conventional nature of signs. Signs of picture writing, although genetically related to a natural tendency to operate with analogous things, are no less conventional than letters of the Latin alphabet when they are used — as verbal signs which they replace — to create words assigned to certain objects. This also concerns the so called onomatopoeias in spoken language in comparison with words devoid of this element of resemblance. Even if it were accepted that the word "rustle" presents or reconstructs (in order to show) the phenomenon of rustling[1], it does not follow that any verbal imitation of a natural phenomenon would be an element of the system of a language such as Polish, English, etc. by the mere fact of mutual resemblance. It is the usus or decision (thus a convention) that decides upon the assignment of this function.

Aren't the above arguments about the conventional nature of linguistic and iconic signs contradictory to the thesis, presented at the beginning, about the natural character of certain indicates? I do not think they are. By "indicate" I mean a certain state of affairs which allows the cognitive subject to infer another state of affairs which is related to the former. Such a state of affairs either can appear spontaneously in the world of nature and be regarded as an indicator of another state of affairs, or can be deliberately created in order to indicate someone else's different state of affairs. The role of convention in creating indicates of this type consists of including certain symbols in the state of affairs which indicates the appearance of another state of affairs.

Using indicates of this type involves familiarity with the convention that establishes the function of the symbol whose appearance becomes a signal.

The above considerations and analyses demonstrate a certain crucial ambiguity of the word "sign". Sometimes its understanding is very broad. A sign, in this broad understanding, let's call it S (I), is any object that is perceived by somebody who can associate it with another object, and that is in the relation of indicating or denoting with the other object. A sign in this understanding can be both a certain state of affairs or a process (an indicate), as well as certain things (symbols, iconic signs) that

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[1]This is L. Blaustein's approach (1931: 106).

designate some objects. Things of this type are very often simply called ”signs,” and this is what determines the other sense of the word. Signs in this other understanding, let's call them Z (II) are usually, though not always, products of a convention, thanks to which indicates (which are such signs) also indirectly have a conventional nature. Independent of convention are only those indicates that we called symptoms. Whether their denotative components can be called signs in the sense of Z (II) will be discussed in a moment.

In order to avoid misunderstandings, it would be advisable to eliminate the use of the word ”sign” either in the first or the second mentioned sense. If the term was to be kept in its most general meaning, then understood signs Z (I) would thus divide into denotative signs and informative signs. Denotative signs (that is, various individual gestures, sounds, symbols), considered separately are more or less indeterminate (or — as Frege said — unsaturated); only in a certain arrangement (that is, in situational or verbal contexts) do they fully activate their function of denoting. The arrangements (that is, signals, maps, sentences, etc.) can be called informative signs.

Both groups of signs include conventional and unconventional signs. Conventional denotative signs are conventional gestures, iconic signs, symbols. Unconventional denotative signs are material elements of certain symptoms (let's call them indications). In reality — and this is what distinguishes them from conventional denotative signs — when separated from the situational context of the information they do not denote anything. The set of unconventional denotative signs is unlimited, as is their indeterminacy. A tear as an element of the indicate called cry, in separation from the situational context, is only a drop of a salty liquid; similarly a sound or color separated from the whole of the symptom does not denote anything. The notion of a denotative sign is relative to a certain function. Thus, what can become an unconventional denotative sign is any object if it appears as a signifying element of the information. By ”informative” I mean signs which indicate the occurrence of certain processes or states of affairs, or postulate occurring certain processes (e.g. human behavior) or states of affairs. Informative signs can be designed or undesigned. The former requires a tetradic relation:

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                Sign

      Sender              Receiver

            State of affairs
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While the latter requires triadic relation:

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                Sign

                    Receiver

          State of affairs
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I call designed informative signs — messages. Let's add that by a sender I mean both a conscious subject who directly communicates something, and a technical device created or designed by a conscious subject to aid communication. Also a receiver can be either a conscious subject or a machine which registers or processes the information for the subject. What belongs to the tetradic group of informative signs are: signals, linguistic utterances, models, mimic expressions, etc. What belongs to the triadic informative signs are symptoms. Sometimes, however, a triadic relation of an informative sign can transform into a tetradic relation of a message, when a symptom is a state of affairs or a process which occurs in the subject who wants to make this state of affairs available (as a sign) to the receiver. This is the case for symptoms of a mental life which are used to express states of the sender in order to communicate them to the receiver. Somebody's cry, a symptom of sorrow, can transform into a designed informative sign if the crying person intends to communicate somebody the information about their internal state. It is also possible that the message will not be received as such — not because of the lack of a receiver, but because the receiver will regard the message as a symptom; for example, a radio text in a foreign language not clearly transmitted enough can be regarded by an inattentive radio listener as noises which accompany either some damage to the device, or the initiating of a jamming signal.

However, another — and sometimes adopted — conception of a sign is possible. In this conception the indicates understood as symptoms (thus, as undesigned information) are not regarded as signs. In this narrower understanding, in order to be a sign, something needs to be either addressed, designed information, or the information's possible denotative component (sentence — word, mimic expression — individual gesture). However, also in this understanding the talking about of conventional and unconventional signs is possible. The latter would appear in the case of the spontaneous communicating of information by means of expressive behavior (e.g. when a

baby calls the mother by moving rapidly and crying, or shows the desired object, or when a dog behaves so as to attract attention of its master). These natural, i.e. spontaneous, *ad hoc* created and communicated signs sometimes become the input of a certain sign convention. For when in a certain social group the usus (thus a convention in the sense $K — III — a$) accepts raising spread hands as a sign of begging, or somebody's decision (a convention in the sense $K — II — a$) incorporates the gesture of crossing arms on the chest to mimic the code of a certain ceremony, the sign acquires a certain specific content that is assigned to the sign on the basis of the semantic convention ($K — II — b$). Perhaps only then it would be right to regard the sign as an informative sign.

And one more remark aimed at avoiding potential misunderstandings. By calling a symbol a denotative sign and by highlighting whether object O is a symbol depends on its having the semantic function, I claimed that objects have this function on the basis of convention. It is so if a denotative sign is considered on the grounds of the system of information, that is, as an element of an informative sign or a message. However, the situation is different in the case of subjective operations of cognitive perspective on the world, in the case of existential experiences of reality and in the case of pure expression. In these situations, which are not aimed at communicating information, sometimes symbols are also present. It is said that there can be symbolism in night dreams, symbolic perspective on the world, symbols in deep feelings, symbolic nature of poetry, myths symbolizing certain truths, etc. Object O in this understanding is a symbol when, through its own properties, it reveals and shows to subject S a certain existential area that is especially valuable in the subject's individual experience. Thus understood the symbol acquires the semantic function not on the basis of convention but on the basis of metaphor. And mutuality or similarity of certain human experiences results in that symbols thus understood may appear spontaneously in subjective operations of many individuals, or — when shared by individuals — become intuitively understandable for them, and thus unanimously interpreted. However, symbols can be hermetic, so exclusively related to somebody's unique experience, that even when shared they will be misunderstood and unclear, or even approached literally instead of metaphorically, so that they will lose their symbolic nature of reference. Thus understood symbols that designate on the basis of metaphor, when incorporated into the system of information, very often lose their spontaneous nature, become conventionalized (on the basis of convention $K — III — a$). What takes place then is a phenomenon that can be called trivialization whose

origins — as was recently shown in an interesting book by L. Jerphagnon (1965) — lie in an elementary duality of human duration, that is: a subject's individual duration which reflects the subject's deep Self, and co-duration with others, e.g. while mutual communication by means of signs created or stabilized by convention. The process of trivialization, which is a result of duration with others in shared time, is very often felt negatively from the perspective of individual duration. Hence, numerous attempts to escape from triviality or to overcome triviality are visible among others in searching for new forms of expression in literature and art, in searching for new metaphoric, as opposed to conventionalized, symbolism. However, such attempts lead in turn, on the grounds of information systems, to acceptance or rejection of new semiotic conventions, which inevitably cause this symbolism to be trivialized.

The above mentioned simple examples of spontaneous expression, as well as pointing out the facts of metaphoric creation of symbolism in existential experience and the facts of existence of the spontaneous function of communicating information, and therefore of creation so to speak $\varphi\acute{\upsilon}\sigma\epsilon\iota$, which is by nature a usus-like, mimic or verbal code, do not contradict the conventional nature of various signs and sign systems. The natural, in this sense characteristic (of man as a creature conscious of living among others), need and function of communicating and affecting others requires creating and improving the instrumental means used for the aims of this function. And indeed these means are created, chosen or established by the subject conscious of these aims. These are, among others, means able to distinguish, name and communicate certain states of affairs (occurring both in the world and in the subject) to others, and means able to preform states of affairs which have not occurred yet, but which are postulated. These means are a result of different types of semiotic conventions. I tried to show that it is indeed so in the present article.

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